

AN IDENTITY PROBLEM: JUDITH BUTLER'S *GENDER TROUBLE* (1990) IN HBO'S *EUPHORIA* (2019)

Gloria Lizana-Iglesias

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to analyse different gender formulations and their manifestation within the fictional narrative of HBO TV show *Euphoria* (2019). This analysis will be done following the constructivist perspective offered by Judith Butler upon the performativity of gender configuration in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's claims with regards to the outer and performative existence of gender, rather than it being part of the individual's interior nature, will be central to the development of this paper, along with her statement as to how gender identity is consolidated according to society's unilateral imposition of a strict patriarchal model that can and must be followed or otherwise subverted. Taking as a point of reference these two possibilities, characters of *Euphoria* such as Nate Jacobs and Cal Jacobs will serve as examples of the ways in which individuals in society may accept the patriarchal imposition and suffer from it, specially taking into account the analysis that Butler provides upon previous feminist writers such as Beauvoir, Wittig and Irigaray, and psychoanalysts like Lacan and Freud. As a counterpoint to this, her discussion of Foucault's Herculine upon the subversion of gender identity within society will be considered so as to explain Jules Vaughn's troubling entrance in western binarism and her willingly failing into conforming to the patriarchal law in terms of attitude, behaviour and physical appearance.

Keywords: Judith Butler, TV series, feminism, Gender studies, queerness, performance, subversion.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2024.6.2559

1. INTRODUCTION: JUDITH BUTLER'S THEORY WITHIN THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF QUEER STUDIES

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* was published in 1990 as a work revising previous feminist theory, specially the one dominating 1970s theoretical frameworks concerned with the signification of gender and more specifically with what "being a woman" meant at all. Their book became a turning point in this respect along with authors like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, since up until that moment feminist writers analysed gender and sexuality as a whole, consequently ignoring the possibilities that both concepts individually produced and how each of them manifested within society, affecting individuals in many different senses. Works like Butler's offered

a separation of these two notions and, along with their departure from the essentialist perspective that dominated 1970s feminism, their work later came to be reviewed as part of the foundational origins of Queer Studies, an academic discipline that was scarcely present at the time in the United States and even more so in Europe.

Gender Trouble, therefore, contested all aspects of feminist theory by aiming straight to its roots and dismantling the basic concepts upon which it was built, that is, that women were those who had been “born women,” or rather in possession of a vagina, and therefore identifying gender roles applied to women as a result of this assignation. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous sentence “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one” (1973, 301) from her work *The Second Sex* (1949) was certainly pointing towards a separation between sex and gender, and it called attention to the cultural component that gender identification holds and its subsequent artificiality in favour of liberating women from a subjection that was claimed to be based upon the nature of the female sex. However, Butler’s analysis of Beauvoir highlights that she unintendedly questioned the cultural aspect of assigning sex to an individual according to their genitals:

For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed,” but implied in her formulation as an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. ... Beauvoir is clear that one becomes a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from “sex.” There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the “one” who becomes a woman is necessarily female. (Butler 1990, 8)

Here lies the radical factor of Butler’s theory on gender, going as far as questioning the nature of “sex” and consequently devirtualising the structure on which Western social identification is founded. Since the body is judged from a cultural sense from the moment an individual is born, then “sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (8). From this point on, Butler digs into the extent of the cultural significance of gender and sex by revising mainly Wittig, Beauvoir, and Irigaray as part of the leaders of feminist’s writings up to that moment and a great part of psychoanalysis theoretical framework through Lacan, Freud and Kristeva.

Butler’s main claim is that gender is performative, that is, an external reality of the individual that can only be “performed” in the sense of constantly repeating a certain pattern that will create a certain image. As Postmodern as Butler is, their conceptualization of gender serves to dismantle the grand narrative under which Western civilization strives, one that imposes a strict binary system in which individuals that do not fall into the two main categories of “men” and “women” are bound to “make trouble” (vii). The absurdity of this imposition is what is questioned throughout the book, following the implication that reifying gender categories solely through repetition makes them unstable, its aim centred on following an unreachable ideal that does not exist as it has been produced by the same system that creates and naturalises it:

I asked, what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between “men” and “women,” and the internal stability of those terms? ... What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (Butler 1990, vii-viii)

This “presumptive heterosexuality” is therefore what creates gender categories and poses them as a logical extension of natural sex, but it is ultimately all part of an illusion that the very same concept produces as what is natural so as to not be contested by individuals. Butler will reject this and the whole narrative of looking for the origin of gender and will focus instead on overviewing the configuration of American and European social and political systems, laying the ground for a radical reconceptualization concerning how society functions within such structure and the ways in which it could be subverted. In this respect, Butler will follow Foucault’s analysis of power, since “Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they come to represent” (Butler 1990, 2). Butler’s externalisation of gender performance will function as an equivalent of his concept of “soul,” which, in general terms, he considers to be “the prison of the body,” radically contrasting traditional Christian thinking where the state of the inner soul serves as a justification of either the nurturing or mistreatment of the external body.

With “women” being a category now not so clearly established, Butler starts by analysing this concept thoroughly within feminism and sex/gender distinction, arriving to compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism as central notions in gender analysis, since they dictate the discourse that has to be deconstructed according to the ways in which language operates. Cultural discourse is founded in intelligibility and therefore will codify heterosexuality as hegemonic while placing other sexual orientations as deviant or impossible to codify. This is the same for the concept of “women,” which is regarded as an Other or even nonexistent (depending on which Feminist writer is followed) when codified against “men.” A different possibility of identity would be, therefore, impossible:

It would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. (Butler 1990, 16)

Therefore, the patterns of gender configuration must be studied with regards to what logic is being followed when assigning a role to an individual and the constriction that it implies; how individuals will struggle to be considered part of a hermetic category or otherwise become obscure within society; how those who are deviant to the hegemonic norm would be regarded as multiple for taking aspects from either different categories of the known-to-all binarism or an uncodified dimension, becoming objects of study deeply

demonised or idealised (as Foucault does with Herculine, to be further analysed), but ultimately rejected by the system.

The characters in *Euphoria* studied in this paper come to represent precisely all of these possibilities: from the social struggles produced from striving to fit into the hegemonic norm, as in the case of Cal and Nate Jacobs, to the disruption and potential subversive quality of characters such as Jules Vaughn, whose presence defies binary configurations of gender. The interest lies in the analysis of a contemporary show like *Euphoria* under this light for its play with gender performativity as the core of the characters' identity development and their conflicts between each other. The novelty of the show makes it a suitable object of study as its representation of gender performance becomes transgressive in highlighting the dangers of hegemonic masculinity and displaying transness while meeting the aesthetics and concerns of the so-called Gen Z culture (Macintosh 2022, 15).

On this basis, in the second section of this paper Nate Jacobs will be analysed regarding the metaphorical loss of his father and subsequent rejection of his figure following Butler studies on the incest and the homosexuality taboos as primary concepts within Psychoanalysis in the configuration of the compulsory-heterosexual frame. The Freudian concept of melancholia will become central for analysing gender construction through the subject's identification with the loved object in the process of mourning its loss.

Finally, in section 3 Jules Vaughn will be revised as a disruptive character within the normative binary framework contrasting with previously discussed Nate Jacobs and his father. Butler revises subversive identities thoroughly to support the foundation of their main claim, i.e., that the imposition of grand narratives that codify identification in society is not useful for the liberation of the individual, in favour of creating discrete agreements convenient for each subject in context. Accordingly, the analysis of Jules will work in parallel to Butler's critique on Foucault examining Herculine's case and his idealisation of a previous multiplicity of the subject previous to the paternal law.

2. NATE AND CAL JACOBS: COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND PERFORMATIVE GENDER

Euphoria is an American teenage show that aired for the first time in 2019. With two seasons containing eight episodes each, the show deals with the story of Rue Bennett (Zendaya Coleman), a seventeen-year-old drug addict who suffers from OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), General Anxiety Disorder and Bipolar Disorder, among other mental health problems which eventually contribute to her current depression. Rue's character serves as the background for the whole show's plot, being also the narrator of all the different stories that intertwine in it, particularly of other pupils in her high school. Accordingly, Jules Vaughn (Hunter Schafer), the new transgender teenage girl in town, is also one of the main characters since she becomes Rue's love interest. Jules will have sexual intercourse with the most important adult man of East Highland (a fictional place

in California), Cal Jacobs (Eric Dane), and will afterwards hold an emotional relationship via a dating app with his son, Nate Jacobs (Jacob Elordi), who has an anonymous profile, consequently making Jules unaware of his true identity. Maddy Pérez (Alexa Demie) is another star of the show, enduring an on-and-off relationship with Nate. Among them, her best friend, Cassie Howard (Sydney Sweeney), will be the significant other of Chris McKay (Algee Smith) in season one and secret lover to Nate Jacobs in season two.

From the very beginning of the show, Nate Jacobs is portrayed as a hyper-masculine, violent character, quarterback and captain of the high school's football team, whose loud personality tends to make a strong impression on those around him. Generally, girls hold him in low esteem as he is often abusive, practicing non-consented sexual acts on them (Levinson S1:E1, 11:07–11:19) or making them fall off their bikes after swearing at them from his car (12:07–12:28), these being simply a couple of examples happening at the start of the series. In short, it does not take too long for the audience to perceive him as the typical leading high school bully. Despite how clear his type of character is established, interestingly enough throughout the series Nate is developed as another subject struggling to find and accept his own identity. This will be understood as resulting in his characteristic misogynistic, violent attitude, most audibly seen in the toxic relationship he shares with his girlfriend Maddy, who comes to perform the role of an asset for Nate's masculinity and, as such, will suffer physical abuse from him when behaving against the coherence of this hegemonic gender performance.

In Butlerian terms, Nate's behaviour is part of the obsessive repetition of a masculine pattern that he reproduces in order to reify his heterosexuality. Nate is perpetually searching for this sort of coherence in his identity while suffocating any other possibility that could interrupt his gender expression:

The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self ... is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence. ... But if these substances are nothing other than coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous. (Butler 1990, 24)

Contrasting with the feeling that Nate is inevitably violent as a cause of his inherent masculinity, Butler's argument would point to an analysis of this kind of behaviour as being based on the "regulation of attributes" or repetition of a masculinist pattern, his gender expression being therefore an artificial—in the sense of "constructed," not "unreal" (32)—recourse that he must feel compelled to portray for some reason. Consequently, if Nate's masculinity seems to be an inevitable feature of his character at first, after reading Butler the reasoning could be that he can, in fact, avoid it, since it is not part of his "nature" but the product of a repressive paternal law that is embedded not only in hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal order of society but also in gender performativity.

This type of constriction is internalised by Nate rather deeply, getting involved in the regulation of his sexual desires. In episode two, minute 5:10 of the show, the narrator offers an account of all the characteristics Nate hates about women and makes him repudiate them as sexual partners. Interestingly enough, this scene not only exhibits the obsessive behaviour he has developed, as seen in the absurd amount of details that this list contains, but also how strongly he rejects any deviant attraction to heterosexuality, since all of the features in the list are traditionally classified as masculine:

Nate presents himself, thus, as a homophobic person who cannot accept his own sexuality. In fact, Nate is obsessed with building a hyper-masculinity that helps him hide his non-normative sexual orientation. (Masanet 2022, 149)

His girlfriend Maddy—and later Cassie—is, therefore, key for the composition of Nate’s struggle, as she personifies the codification of femininity in the heterosexual frame, necessary for the reaffirmation of his own masculinity. He then becomes, by assuming several patriarchal masculine traits, “intelligible” within the discourse of the patriarchal law and at the same time coherent for his own self, in other words, he understands himself under that language. Moreover, Nate particularly strives to embody a hegemonic masculinity that requires a constant assertion of his authority. As defined by Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities* (1995), hegemonic masculinity depends on the reification of the dominant position of men in society through a successful claim to authority given by its relation to some kind of institutional power (Connell 2005, 77). However, violence is not necessary *per se*, although it serves to reify his gender pattern since “hegemonic masculinity” has to do with “the way in which they negotiate their identities in relation to others” (Duncanson 2015, 233). In this sense, Nate’s violent character suggests he is in need of compensating for a lack of such direct link to authority. The question therefore becomes, where does the strict imposition of patriarchal law into Nate’s conscience come from, and why is it apparently so necessary for him to constantly reify it? In order to answer this, the conduct of his father, Cal Jacobs, requires proper analysis.

Cal also dedicates himself to the arts of building a social image, in this case that of the perfect father. Not as violently as Nate, he personifies the epitome of patriarchy. He is the most influential man in town and represents the leading figure in the model of the nuclear family, central within European and American patriarchal societies and especially in the United States. As such, Cal would seem unproblematic for everyone around him, publicly embodying a hegemonic masculinity reified by his dominant status as a businessman. The audience of the show, however, has a very different image of him since, in opposition to the development of Nate’s character, his obscure side is first shown in the series throughout the pilot chapter, previous even to his ideal father facade, as he turns out to be the mysterious sexual encounter Jules has the night of McKay’s party (Levinson S1:E1, 48:59). At some point, the audience discovers that Cal’s secret meetings with especially young men and transgender girls have been taking place for a long time

(S1:E2). Later in the show, Cal's backstory comes to portray him as a husband who had to repress his homosexual desires when he was a teenager and get married to his pregnant girlfriend, who would eventually become his current wife (S2:E4). Thus, Cal leading two different lives parallel to each other and therefore incompatible comes to show that, complementary to the recalcitrant reification of his masculinity for the public sphere, an escape becomes necessary, a hole through which the reality of the constructed fantasy leaks, where the facade is reified as such: an artificial image created with a specific purpose. This is part of the instability that Butler associates with the construction of gender by the repetition of certain patterns, a mode that is ultimately condemned to break down:

the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed [sexuality] reveal not only that “identity” is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious (the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him). (Butler 1990, 28)

This aligns with Foucault's theories on biopower and biopolitics developed in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976), by which the State is understood to regulate individuals in society biologically, that is, promoting behaviours to control how people live in order to optimise their lives in favour of productivity. Gender will be posed by Butler as one regulatory ideal in this sense, producing subjects –like Cal or Nate– which regulate themselves. As a result, if the coherence in character is disrupted because of repressed sexuality, as Butler argues, the purpose of Cal Jacobs hiding his true sexuality is to avoid breaking the paternal law with a non-codified element. In other words, his sexual desires are seen as deviant from the compulsory heterosexual frame, whether they are exclusively homosexual or bisexual, and since such frame is the foundation of his public image, he is unable to reconcile his eccentric sexuality with it.

However, such deviation is not something the paternal law does not actually contemplate within its discourse since, through the act of prohibiting the homosexual taboo, it is simply being codified as out of the norm, but not necessarily obscure or unknown. Cal's need for a break in the performance of the hegemonic masculine pattern invokes Foucault's “points of resistance,” produced by the same power relationships and, therefore, reifying them (Foucault 1978, 95). Butler is influenced by Foucault on this point since the latter discusses sexuality as inscribed in power and, therefore, lacking an existence outside of it:

In other words, by founding their arguments in Foucault's view on sex and power, Butler argues that deviant sexuality is only so within a determined “normative framework,” in

this case the patriarchal law, and therefore heterosexuality would be defined only in terms of opposition to homosexuality. That is, the heterosexuality that Cal is compelled to portray is only compulsory in the patriarchy, which is why his repression of homosexual desire leads him to live a different life in the shadows than that he performs in the sunlight.

On the other hand, Nate contrasts with Cal in his impossibility of emotionally managing that repression, since his acting in the shadows is never fulfilled, as he enjoys sexual conversations with gay men on the internet but never meets up with them. In addition, the emotional relationship he shares with Jules ends up in his legally threatening her once they finally meet personally in order to avoid the uncovering of his secret. In this sense, he is more invested in reaffirming his masculinity more deeply to himself through his relationship with Maddy, resulting in his violent temperament. Violence would presumably serve him therefore as a reaffirmation of his masculinity and simultaneously as a way to cope with repressed homosexuality. However, understanding Nate's behaviour in these terms is simply playing within the patriarchal codification of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Butler, while overviewing Riviere's work, questioned the accuracy of the gay man's identification with "heterosexual traits" as a reflection of his sexual repression:

This lack of an overt differentiating style [from heterosexual men] or appearance may be diagnosed as a symptomatic defence [against their own homosexuality] only because the gay man in question does not conform to the idea of the homosexual that the analyst has drawn and sustained from cultural stereotypes. (Butler 1990, 51)

Since gender is performative, the assimilation of heterosexuality with violence, for instance, and the equivalent relation between homosexuality and femininity are cultural artefacts, and, as a result, there is no necessary correlation between a man who is violent in his gender performance of heterosexuality and his repression of homosexual desire. Accordingly, in order to find a different scheme of justification for Nate's abuse, it would be necessary to trace his conduct back to its origin.

What seems to become central in Nate Jacobs throughout the whole series is the moment he discovers his father's secret sex tapes, as narrated at the start of the first season's episode two. Following this scene, Nate's hyperfixation with his own physical training comes to show the continuity of the tapes discovery with his current situation as football-team captain and uncomfortability with the presence of other masculine bodies. That is, the narrative appears to revolve around how Nate's personality was determined by the precise moment he started watching his father practice sex. This will become more deeply developed with the speech of Nate's mother in the sixth episode of season two, where she struggles to explain how and why he quickly changed, becoming generally a sadder young boy: "It's just a mystery to me, 'cause you were such a sweet little baby. ... And then, I don't know, somewhere, like, around eight or nine, you darkened" (Levinson

S2:E6, 26:17-27:01). When discussing “the melancholic denial/preservation of homosexuality in the production of gender within the heterosexual frame” (Butler 1990, 57) following Freudian psychoanalysis, Butler argues:

This process of internalizing lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation when we realize that the incest taboo, among other functions, initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego and that this ego recuperates from this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire. In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union, it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is deflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. Hence “the young boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him.” (Butler 1990, 59)

In this sense, Nate would identify with Cal since, from the moment he watches the sex tapes, he loses his father and, in the process of mourning, the internalisation of his father’s actions become part of his own. Furthermore, both the incest and the homosexual taboos grow into the core of Nate’s trauma, and, because the tapes discovery happens in secrecy, from the beginning he understands their content as prohibited and therefore gets involved in the paternal law’s gender discourse. In other words, Nate recognizes heterosexuality as compulsory for success in the public sphere and different sexual practices as deviant, just like his father demonstrates. This seems more like a play between the glorification of masculinity and, therefore, the necessary detriment of femininity. Resulting from this line of thought, the consequential “repudiation of the mother” would be explained by Butler as follows:

Clearly, Freud means to suggest that the boy must choose not only between the two object choices, but the two sexual dispositions, masculine and feminine. That the boy usually chooses the heterosexual would, then, be the result, not of the fear of castration by the father, but of the fear of castration –that is, the fear of “feminization” associated within heterosexual cultures with male homosexuality. (Butler 1990, 59)

Therefore, ultimately what Nate interiorizes is the need to differentiate himself from femininity at all instances to avoid the social “castration,” and the repression that comes with it means neglecting a proper search for his own identity, one that is established as obscure and deviant from the beginning as his father’s. This idea is reified in the speech Cal delivers to Nate when he is still a child, as he has already found the sex tapes. Even though Cal’s awareness of his son’s discovery is doubtful, there seems to be still an intimate connection between them that goes beyond what is explicitly stated in words:

You’re a strong man, Nathaniel. ... You have an iron will. ... someday it will lead you to greatness. But no one in this world will ever root for you. They’ll see what I see and despise you for it. Sometimes you’ll know, sometimes you won’t. But the farther you go the sharper their blades. Just don’t ever give them an opening. (Levinson S1:E2, 1:50-2:56)

In his direct address, Cal reinforces Nate's simultaneous internalisation of his father's conduct and the paternal law as determinants in social survival "for a man." The metaphor of the blade becomes meaningful as it aligns precisely with Butler's theorising of gender performance as the repetition of a coherent pattern which exposes its artificiality through intervals between repetitions. As scarcely specific as the reference for those holding "their blades" is, it is perfectly understood by both Nate and the audience as a menace coming from society, which will potentially stab in any given "opening" to destabilise Nate's –and Cal's– gender performance and, hence, identity.

3. JULES VAUGHN: GENDER AND BODY SUBVERSION

In opposition to the submissive adaptation of the previously revised individuals into social gender norms, the character of Jules Vaughn is introduced as an apparently misfit girl who creates trouble against binarism. Here lies the interest in *Euphoria* as it contrasts with historically stigmatising representations of trans experiences in popular media (McLaren 2021, 172) by refusing to define Jules' gender identity explicitly, which is explained by Macintosh as an act of "eliding labels in favor of a more fluid representation of their developing intimacy" (2022, 22). This is part of the show's transgressive character, as the incognita demands for the audience to become active watchers and deconstruct stereotypes present in popular media, which has traditionally demonstrated to be uninterested in "explor[ing] the complexity of a prescribed character" given that stereotypes are useful in making a product easily understandable and, therefore, characters are usually "purposefully constructed to perpetuate gay [or queer] stereotypes" (Chung 2007, 100).

The mystery of Jules' character at the beginning of the series is partly provoked by her striking appearance, as she contrasts performative elements such as different layers of fabric in her vibrant-coloured outfits, and the fact that she is new in the suburbs, having previously lived in the city with her currently divorced parents (Levinson S1:E1, 12:37). Therefore, she is basically a stranger in a very small area where everyone is known to each other. This, along with Jules' tendency to independently decide her own plans, substituting her attendance at a popular party for a meeting with an anonymous man in a remote apartment (S1:E1, 13:30–14:00), adds meaning to her portrayal as an autonomous individual who is accustomed to living in the dark, apathetic towards social approval. In so doing, she inevitably fits in the obscurity that is created by the coherent discourse of the paternal law, as an undetermined subject that threatens to alter the binary order and could, as a result, potentially contribute to its subversion. But is Jules actually subversive? Does she in reality defeat the paternal law successfully?

For the purpose of this inquiry, this section will focus on the third chapter of Butler's work, titled "Subversive Bodily Acts" (1990, 79–141), where they discuss the nature of subversion and its possibilities. In the section "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva" (1990,

79–93), Butler revises the concept of the semiotic that Kristeva introduces into the Lacanian division between the Symbolic and the Real, directly defying its fundamentals. As Butler writes:

Kristeva challenges the Lacanian narrative which assumes cultural meaning requires the repression of that primary relationship to the maternal body. She argues that the “semiotic” is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body, which not only refutes Lacan’s primary premise, but serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the Symbolic. (Butler 1990, 79)

Where Lacan places the Symbolic—as codified by the discourse of paternal law—completely parallel to the Real because of the latter’s pre-discursive nature, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva institutes the semiotic as part of language connected to the maternal sphere of the Real. In this sense, the semiotic would be subversive to the paternal law since, through using its language, it is capable of breaking apart from its rules and simultaneously returning to the maternal origin, deprived of the strict rules of the Symbolic. Specifically, poetic language serves this purpose for the multiplicity and lack of a necessary coherent structure that it implies, which would result in the alteration of the unilateral Symbolic discourse (Butler 1990, 79–80).

At first, the semiotic strongly reminds of Jules in this respect, since she is a girl who plays within the norm by using its instruments, but still becomes subversive in it. She is poetic speech in a general sense when compared to Nate and Cal Jacobs or Maddy and Cassie as representatives of the paternal law’s function in society, as her multiplicity allows her to conform to different patterns according to her own desires without necessarily fulfilling every aspect that being a normative girl requires. She undoubtedly repeats a feminine pattern but is not sexualized or starved for masculine attention, which contrasts drastically with Maddy and Cassie’s development. The different outstanding colours of her outfit, apparently not following any pre-established social code, and her still being very feminine while having a penis is what makes her “poetic” in Kristeva’s sense, as a breakage in the paternal law that, in fact, does not follow its norms. From Kristeva’s psychoanalytic perspective, this idea is actually reinforced: “Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality” (Butler 1990, 80). When Jules is perceived as a character who has lost connection with her mother, the simultaneous moving to the suburbs with her father could be regarded as entering the Symbolic order after the rupture of her maternal link. By becoming a place of subversion, Jules would be recovering the link with her mother, in this sense: “While the Symbolic is predicated upon the rejection of the mother, the semiotic, through rhythm, assonance, sound play, and repetition, re-presents or recovers the maternal body in poetic speech” (Butler 1990, 82). Jules would be, therefore,

manifesting multiplicity as a way of coping with the suffocating reality of living without her mother.

However, this vision only works by considering a vast general view of her situation, and it is, in fact, not true. In reality, Jules' mother lost custody over her because of mistreatment, she obliged her to undergo psychiatric treatment in order to "cure her queerness" (Levinson S2:E4, 0:07–3:20). That is, Jules' mother was precisely the embodiment of the paternal law's repression, who made her daughter suffer physically the consequences of binary imposition. In this regard, moving with her father implies freedom from the Symbolic as Jules is able to explore and enact her identity freely—at least, in principle. Then the imposition of the paternal law would not be necessarily related to the rupture of the maternal link and the repression of its multiplicity, since Jules did not lose a mother that allowed her freedom of identity.

Following this line of thought, Butler refutes Kristeva's theory—and Lacan's simultaneously—since they do not believe in the maternal link as a prediscursive locus of the individual from which multiplicity is recovered, and considers that "it is unclear whether the primary relationship to the maternal body ... is a viable construct and whether it is even a knowable experience according to either of their linguistic theories" (Butler 1990, 80). The character of Jules seems to be more suitable with Butler's view that the prediscursive maternal link is not a concept created after studying practical experience, as she, in fact, proves to be contradictory to it. As Butler argues against Kristeva, the concept of the paternal law as the place of restriction and the opposite maternal locus of liberation are just effects created by the same configuration of culture, and not a challenge against it. That is, this separation is not made by taking an outer perspective of society, but within the same rule that the culture which is attempted to be studied imposes: "the repression of the feminine does not require that the agency of repression and the object of repression be ontologically distinct. Indeed, repression may be understood to produce the object it comes to deny" (Butler 1990, 93). The feminine as repressed by the paternal law and reappearing in poetic language is, therefore, simply amplifying the current cultural configuration, lacking any sense of subversion at all. In fact, the character of Jules could not be considered as actually subversive under this light since her performative appearance and movements in the shadows would only add to her configuration as a subject in the margins of society, rather than present her as successful in displacing social codes embedded in the paternal law.

However, that Kristeva's theory does not work in justifying Jules's subversion does not necessarily mean that Jules *per se* is not subversive, although it takes her back to the beginning. Indeed, Jules will appear as interested in disrupting the patriarchal framework from the inside, as shown in her claim: "In my head, it's like if I can conquer men, I can conquer femininity. ... But it's not like I even want to conquer it. It's like I want to fucking obliterate it" (Levinson S1:E7, 38:35–39:20). Paige Macintosh analyses this

fragment as an argument on gender and sexuality “clearly anchored in the safe, explicitly trans space of the city” (2022, 23) as it takes place in a trip to the city with Anna, an outside character, stranger to the city and the main group of teenagers in the show. It is clear that Jules reads herself as deviant from the canon and that her intentionality is based on a play within the binary frame of definition, and yet she does not exactly wish to fit into the norm, but make it her own. In this regard, Foucault plays an important part when explaining subversion, since he also believed in the simultaneous “generative” and “prohibitive” nature of repression, as Butler explains: “If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (93). Then, subversive acts would be those that, happening from within cultural configuration, contradict it to the point of disruption, allowing a multiplicity that is not necessarily pre-discursive.

In the section “Foucault, Herculine, and the Politics of Sexual Discontinuity” (Butler 1990, 93-111) Butler reviews Foucault’s theory on the coextensiveness of power and sex, and his overview in this regard of Herculine Barbin as a figure of bodily multiplicity, being an hermaphrodite in the nineteenth century who was assigned female gender and obliged to change it to male around the age of twenty:

To be sexed, for Foucault, is to be subjected to a set of social regulations, to have the law that directs those regulations reside both as the formative principle of one’s sex, gender, pleasures, and desires and as the hermeneutic principle of self-interpretation. The category of sex is thus inevitably regulative. (Butler 1990, 96)

In this sense, Foucault positions the core of gender categorization in the assignment of sex, for which not only Herculine but Jules too would serve as suitable examples, since the assignment of the male sex when the latter was born according to her genitals is what led her mother to intern Jules in a psychiatric hospital so as to make sure she did not deviate from the social rules that surround having a penis and, accordingly, being a boy. Butler follows Foucault in this perspective on sex and further social configurations as an artifice. However, they do not share the same view on Herculine’s case and consequently offer different conceptualizations upon analysing Jules’ gender identity.

For Foucault, Herculine’s sexual ambivalence embodies a realm of multiplicity that successfully defeats sexual categorization and allows for its riddance. In *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite* (1978) he idealises her case and considers that under “the disappearance of ‘sex’” the body becomes able to explore numerous processes that result “in the proliferation of pleasures outside of the framework of intelligibility enforced by univocal sexes within a binary relation” (Butler 1990, 96). Essentially, Herculine would be proof of culture’s artificiality in decoding sex and the world of possibilities that the imposition of the law forbids. This inevitably reminds us of Lacan’s and Kristeva’s maternal origin, although

Foucault maintains in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976) that “recourse to a sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics” (Butler 1990, 97), which makes him assert the pre-discursive multiplicity of identity while rejecting it at the same time. Furthermore, he considers that previous to h/er change into the male sex, Herculine was open to enjoying the multiplicity of pleasures, which works similarly to Jules’ preservation of her penis while maintaining a female gender identification, since it could be regarded as materialising the free benefit of this ambivalence. Both Herculine and Jules suffered from the imposition of a univocal gender, with the difference that the former had to endure it for the rest of h/er life and therefore decided to commit suicide, while the latter, living in a more modern sociopolitical context, is allowed to get rid of such enforcement when she is still very young.

However, Foucault’s statement is completely refuted by Butler for not taking into account the subjection to the law that Herculine suffered from the beginning of h/er life:

Whether “before” the law as a multiplicitous sexuality or “outside” the law as an unnatural transgression, those positionings are invariably “inside” a discourse which produces sexuality and then conceals that production through a configuring of a courageous and rebellious sexuality “outside” of the text itself. (Butler 1990, 99)

This would mean that both Herculine’s and Jules’s “multiplicity” falls within the law, which is the one that produces this effect of ambiguity and, therefore, they actually never get rid of or subvert its imposition, but are always codified as extraordinary according to it.

Interestingly enough, Foucault also discusses how Herculine’s homosexual practices among women in the convent at the beginning of her life allowed her to bear a “non-identity,” from which Butler suggests the idea that “homosexuality is instrumental to the overthrow the category of sex” (Butler 1990, 100). That is, rather than being able to experience multiplicity, in homosexual contexts Herculine was able to get rid of any sex categorization. In this sense, it is important to analyse Jules and the different relationships she maintains as “the narrative moves from the construction of Jules as an object of fetishism and violence to a subject of love and intimacy” (Masanet 2022, 147). On the one hand, she shares “female homosexual” experiences with Rue during the whole show and briefly with Anna and the general feeling is that she can live freely around them. This attitude directly contrasts with the moment he encounters Nate for the first time when he confronts Jules about her identity with a “Nobody that looks like you is minding their own business. I know what you are” while behaving aggressively with her (Levinson S1:E1, 42:03–44:48). Furthermore, when Nate and Jules see each other for the first time and she sexually rejects him he takes advantage of her powerless situation and accuses her of being a menace to himself and his family, threatening to publicly reveal the sexual pictures she has sent, which could be considered “child pornography” (S1:E4, 44:48–47:40). Analysed from a general perspective it would be clear how safe Jules feels around

other women, where she can portray her non-identity unrestrained, and the dangers that come along with her heterosexual relationships since her sexual categorization becomes central to their development.

Her encounter with Nate reveals how Jules is received when she leaves the margins and attempts to insert herself into the norm as she is, causing her to use violent words related to battle when exposing her concerns with gender (as previously explained in “conquer men” to “conquer femininity” and even “obliterate it”) and describe her life in the suburbs as “claustrophobic” (S1:E7, 34:45). This is precisely what makes the dynamic between Nate and Jules so interesting since, as Macintosh argues, “While she is clearly accepted and treated as ‘one-of-the-girls’ by the other high schoolers, the presence of Nate and his father reminds viewers of the constant threat suburbia poses to nonnormative identities” (2022, 23). However, these encounters still fall under the same reading of the law and work according to it. Where Jules poses a threat to the binary frame of definition, she is silenced and expelled back to the margins by a hegemonic representative of masculinity and, therefore, the paternal law. In this sense, what differentiates Foucault from Butler is that the latter insists on how these homosexual relationships are “gender transgressions” that succeed in reconfiguring the binary social structure, but do not, in any case, fall out of it, so that Herculine’s sexuality “is not outside the law, but is the ambivalent production of the law” (Butler 1990, 105), as would Jules’s bodily and sexual variability be.

From Butler’s perspective, Herculine’s constriction to the law is again part of the performativity of gender, since the binary imposition goes beyond the legal sphere and affects her mentally and physically, which eventually leads h/er to a fatal end. According to them, this is part of the naturalisation of sex which constricts bodies different to the binary imposition as “trouble,” as they are not part of the genital distinction that results in gender categories (106). Butler revises this more in-depth, as they assert the idea of gender expression as an artifice:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts ... are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 1990, 136)

Consequently, both Herculine’s and Jules’s genitals do not necessarily connect with either their gender identity or with their sexuality or desires. That gender is constructed by the repetition of some acts performed on the body suggests the real width of identity possibilities and reveals gender as regulated by the law to be simply the imposition of a particular mode of appearance for a particular number of reasons which could be different altogether, depending on the social interest. Instead of portraying nature as the genesis

of true gender, Butler argues that the “original nature” is an effect, an illusion, produced by the discourse that regulates gender identification, as gender is an overt reality that can be constructed in different ways. As a result, Jules should not be constricted to behave in any specific manner as Herculine should not have been either, but the ambiguity that their body configuration suggested to the binary system provoked their perception as subversive, for which they were both silenced: Herculine with legal transitioning and her following suicide, and Jules through Nate’s threatening against the revealing of his relationship with a transgender girl.

4. CONCLUSION

As a contemporary show dealing with Gen Z teenagers issues on sex and gender, *Euphoria* serves as a modern cultural product worth analysing for its transgressive nature in displaying in detail current dynamics produced by gender performativity. Its characters and their behaviour serve as suitable examples to demonstrate how Butler’s theory of performativity of gender operates. As Butler considers that genders are fabrications performed over the body, they hold a sense of variability according to each social context that discloses them as non-compulsory in essence, being subjected only to cultural conventions rather than to any natural instinct. On the one hand, Nate and Cal Jacobs would serve as an embodied example of how the compulsory-heterosexuality frame works in society and constricts individuals to follow a series of conducts according to their assigned gender that entails them to strategies in relationships that can become suffocating. Meanwhile, Jules Vaughn’s apparent contradiction between the configuration of her body and her gender identity successfully proves, not her obscurity and configuration outside of the law, but rather, in a deeper sense, the artificiality of gender and how binarism defeats itself through the imposition of a unilateral strict pattern. In sum, a great part of the conflicts that take place in the storylines of the characters analysed are related to gender identity and performativity as its artificiality and the striving to conform to a particular and idealistic pattern becomes conflicting for the development of different behaviours that fall out of binary patterns of definition. Hence, the need for constant reaffirmation in gender identities due to their instability becomes the source for the complexities of each character’s development individually and between each other.

WORKS CITED

- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1973. *The Second Sex*. Translated by E. M. Parshley. Vintage.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Chung, Sheng Kuan. 2007. "Media Literacy Art Education: Deconstructing Lesbian and Gay Stereotypes in the Media." *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 26: 98–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2007.00514.x>
- Connell, Raewyn. 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd Edition. University of California Press.
- Duncanson, Claire. 2015. "Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations." *Men and Masculinities* 18 (2): 231–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15584912>.
- Foucault, Michel. 2010. *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Translated by Richard McDougall. Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I, an Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books.
- Kristeva, Julia. 2006. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Introduction by Leon Roudiez. Translated by Margaret Waller. Columbia University Press.
- Levinson, Sam, dir. 2019. *Euphoria*. Aired June 16, 2019, on HBO.
- Macintosh, Paige. 2022. "Transgressive TV: Euphoria, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic." *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 2(1): 2. <https://doi.org/10.3998/gi.1550>.
- McLaren, Jackson Taylor, Susan Bryant, and Brian Brown. 2021. "'See me! Recognize me!' An analysis of transgender media representation." *Communication Quarterly* 69 (2): 172–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2021.1901759>.
- Masanet, Maria-Jose, Rafael Ventura, and Eduard Ballesté. 2022. "Beyond the 'Trans Fact'? Trans Representation in the Teen Series Euphoria: Complexity, Recognition, and Comfort." *Social Inclusion* 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i2.4926.q>.